

# CLUB ENOLOGIQUE

  
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APPELLATION D'ORIGINE PROTÉGÉE  
Mis en bouteille  
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DOMAINE  
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MARTIN

## Burgundy of dreams

THE CHARDONNAY ISSUE

Irish whiskey | Vegan fine dining | Wine and the metaverse

# 50 shades of Chardonnay

**It's the ubiquitous grape, loved and loathed in equal measure – and nowhere does it reach greater profundity than in Burgundy. Jasper Morris MW looks at how perception and public opinion have shifted in recent times**  
Photography by Deborah Wastie



After the premature oxidation issue of the 1990s, the 2010s were all about a reductive character in Burgundian whites

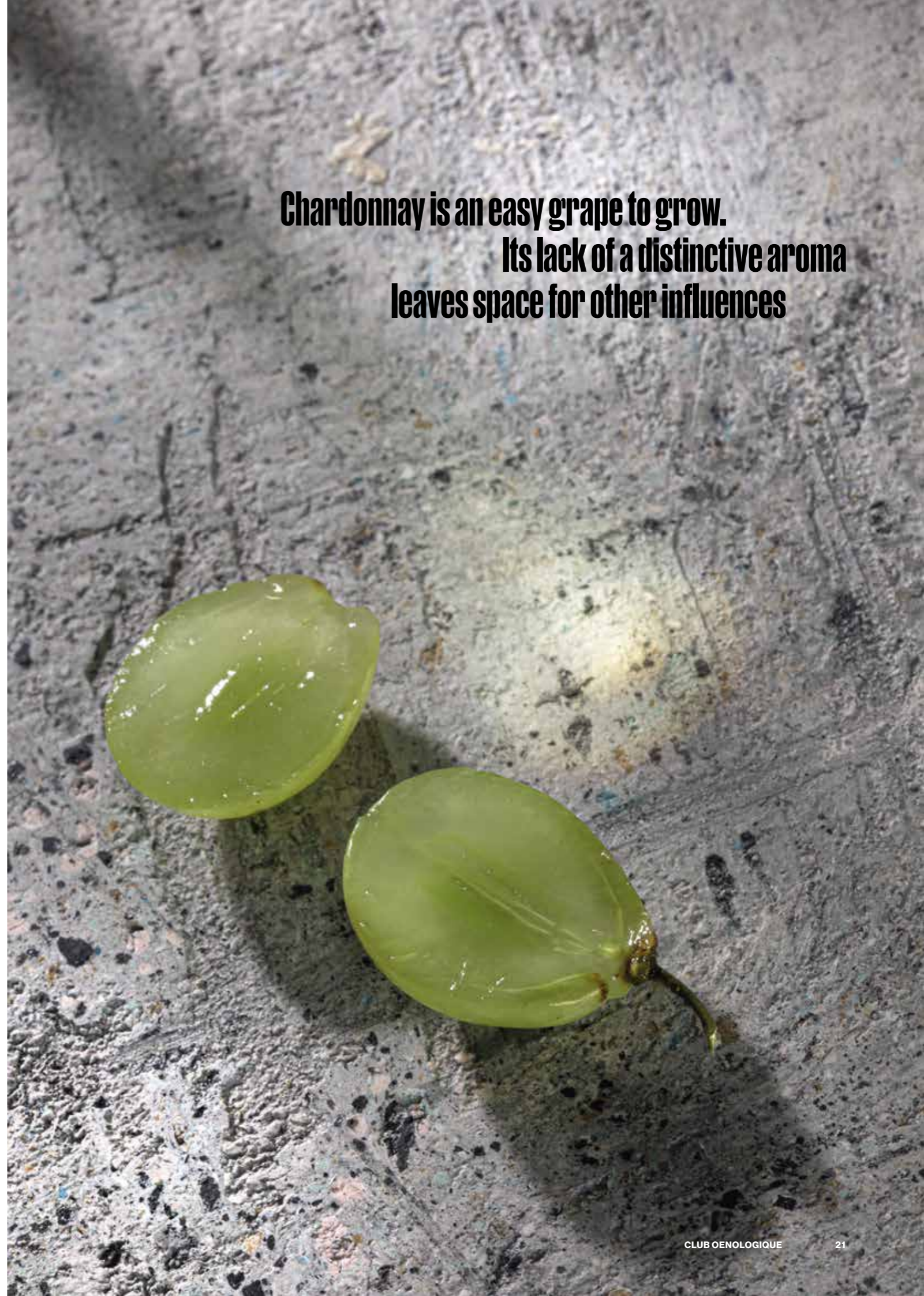
**P**erceptions of Chardonnay in Burgundy have changed a great deal in the 40-plus years during which I have been documenting the region's white wines. It is worth noting that books written prior to that period did not even mention that Chardonnay *was* the white grape of Burgundy – it was merely taken for granted. In his wonderful *Stay Me with Flagons* (1940), Maurice Healy does not reference the grape once when covering white Burgundy. He does, however, offer some wonderful, sometimes allegorical descriptions of the wines – of which more later...

Chardonnay may well be a recent arrival in Burgundy, despite the existence of a village of the same name in the Mâconnais since Roman times (there is almost certainly no connection between the two). Thanks to DNA testing, we know the parentage of Chardonnay (Pinot Noir x Gouais Blanc) but not where or when it emerged on the viticultural scene. In 1763, Abbé Tainturier specified Chardenet (sic) or Pinot Blanc as the grape for white Burgundy, using the two names as synonyms, as was still the case for Dr Lavalley in 1855. They are, of course, quite separate grapes. It was not until 1896 that the current spelling was formally agreed. Even so, the habit of referring to the grape as Pinot Chardonnay was hard to kill – the appellation Pinot-Chardonnay Mâcon was not officially abolished until September 2005.

What is the origin of the name? A *chardon* is a thistle in French, so I have rather cheekily been developing the theory that Chardonnay grows like a thistle anywhere it wants to – unlike the more sensitive Pinot Noir. A discussion over lunch with the Rollet family of Domaine de la Chapelle in Pouilly-Fuissé took this further: vine roots need help to dig deep, and one theory is that they have taken advantage of the deep root systems of thistles to accompany them down through the mother rock. This particular thistle has certainly spread its spores everywhere in the viticultural world.

Only quite recently did I discover that, as late as the 1960s and early 1970s, it was actually very hard to sell white Burgundy. By the time I came on to the scene, the region's white wines were faring better than the reds, which had gone through a weak period due to the chemical scourges of fertilisation and herbicides. The whites benefited from bumper crops in years such as 1973 and 1979, enjoying a return to international favour.

**Chardonnay is an easy grape to grow.  
Its lack of a distinctive aroma  
leaves space for other influences**





The white Burgundies of the late 1970s were succulent wines of a pale golden hue, though often with a streak of green. The bouquets, too, might have a vegetal greenness to them – what would now be called a phenolic edge – brought about largely through the methods of processing. Those were the days of metal hydraulic presses – Vaslin was the principal brand – that used to chew up the skins while pressing the grapes. This gave the wines more flavour but a rougher texture and less immediate appeal, especially when combined with the heavy doses of sulphur that were practised in those days. But that did not really matter, because neither critics nor consumers tasted the wines in their youth at that period. Importers might have done so, but they were looking for future potential rather than immediate gratification. This effect of including an element of the skins with the juice resulted in multilayered wines capable of ageing extremely well, reinforced by the higher levels of protective sulphur. Then, as now, it would be difficult to ascribe a particular set of flavours to white Burgundy as a whole, though each of the main appellations would (or should) have had its own descriptors. The most classic, uttered almost by rote by French sommeliers, was *beurre et noisettes* (butter and hazelnuts) for Meursault. That effect is no longer possible: it required golden grapes that had not become overripe; the wines then would be at 12–12.5% abv, often with a bit of help from the sugar merchant. In the current climate, luscious golden grapes will be much too high in sugar and too low in acidity. (Incidentally, Maurice Healy's take, back in 1940, was this: 'The white wines of Puligny and Chassagne are lean and slender, but without any lack of strength; in Meursault we find a rich, golden wine, quite as dry as other white Burgundies, but with a delightful lazy oiliness about it that suggests Brutus rather than Cassius.')

The 1980s saw some good to very good white Burgundy vintages. Perhaps the pick of them were 1982, 1985 and 1989, but there were interesting offerings in 1986 and 1988, while 1981, 1984 and maybe 1987 worked better in Chardonnay than Pinot Noir. However, it was during this period that we began to take our eye off the ball, and more so in the 1990s as the golden



age of red Burgundy began to dawn. All the conversation was about how to make an ethereal red wine, while questions on production of the whites tended to be limited to 'How much new oak do you use?' We all messed up – importers and critics, as well as the producers themselves – through complacency, and were ignorant of the dangers on the horizon.

For a while, Chardonnay ruled supreme, though one could also sense the backlash, encapsulated by the 'Anything but Chardonnay' (ABC) brigade. White Burgundy was often omitted from the ABC club because the wines continued to be known by their appellations rather than their grape. In his 1998 book *The Wine Avenger*, extrovert and iconoclastic New York wine expert Willie Gluckstern revealed himself to be not so much of a fan of Chardonnay, regardless of its source. He described it as 'the world's most overrated grape [with] only fair acidity, negligible sweetness and little flavor or aroma of its own. As a wine, the only things Chardonnay has a lot of – too much of – are alcohol and new oak. The product is rich, viscous and heady, with aromas of fresh-baked bread, vanilla, butterscotch and canned fruit cocktail – all the result of being revved up by fermentation and extended contact with new oak barrels.'

Chardonnay, whether from Burgundy or elsewhere, does not get my vote either if it tastes like that, which of course it need not. Gluckstern does have a point, though. Essentially, Chardonnay is non-aromatic and full-bodied. It is an easy grape to grow and a relatively easy wine to make. Its full-bodied nature offers a generous mouthfeel, and it is the lack of a distinctive aroma of its own that leaves space for other influences. These are the flavours that arise from the relative warmth of the growing season, the climate of the region and the nature of the soil; they

reflect the vinification and maturation methods – from cultured yeasts with their own attributes, to the toasty, yeasty vanilla of various types of oak – allowing them to exert their influence on the character and, especially, the bouquet of the wine.

What Chardonnay really does do is provide a textural background on to which the characteristics of a given terroir can emerge – be it the white flowers of Chablis Grand Cru Blanchot, sunshine on the stones of St-Aubin Premier Cru En Remilly, or the electric backbone of Puligny-Montrachet Premier Cru Les Pucelles.

The first half of the 1990s gave no sign of the problems that were about to spring their unwelcome surprise: the scourge of premature oxidation – often shortened to premox or, sometimes, just the pox. 1996 was the first vintage heavily affected, though the results were only seen when the wines reached around five years old, well before the supposed sell-by date for fine white Burgundy. Wines would darken rapidly in the glass – sometimes already in the bottle – with unattractive aromatics of furniture polish and bruised apples. There are many causes behind this, though few explain the rapid falling off a cliff experienced from the 1996 vintage, except perhaps changes in the production and treatment of corks. This is not the place to evaluate all the different technical issues – now for the most part resolved – but one contributing factor may well have been a change in emphasis in what many producers were trying to do with their white wines. The magical success of fine red Burgundy in this period caused winemakers to focus on purity and elegance; but while Pinot may well aspire to ballerina stardom, Chardonnay is a much more muscular grape, more at home on the rugby field. Try to make it too pretty by cleaning up the juice and inhibiting influence



from the skins, and you risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater. The seeming impurities when you do not clean up the juice so much also contribute many of the preservative qualities needed in a wine destined for longer ageing.

If the lush, plush, lubricious golden grape style of white Burgundy has been less appealing of late, what of the other end of the scale? This is all about preserving tension in the wine, viewed as especially important in the aftermath of the premature oxidation issue. Long ago, vigneron used to refer (positively) to a wine as being *nerveux* or having *nervosité*, though not meaning nervous in English – possibly nervy is a little closer, but more towards the racy side of the spectrum. Then came *tendu*, which could mean stretched but was referring more to being tense: *belle tension*, good tension.

Such phrases have some traction but can easily become clichés, and the buzzwords tend to change every couple of years. Next up was ‘mineral’, which infuriated geologists because they validly maintain that you cannot taste mineral elements in the wine. But that’s not really the point; we use the mineral descriptor as a metaphor, and I think the word accurately conveys an image of the style of the wine. For the past two years – so we must be due for a change imminently – ‘saline’ has been the buzzword for this sort of wine.

If Meursault has changed from Rubens to Modigliani, how has this come about? Picking earlier has been one factor, employed to good effect by some and reviled by others. There has been a bit of a local civil war in the appellation on this subject. It is important to note that the exact day of picking does not really matter – the way a vigneron conducts viticulture and the style he or she is aiming for will dictate the date of harvest.

Another emerging stylistic trend – reaching its apogee in the

early years of last decade, though since refined – is a reductive character in white-wine making. Reduction is the opposite of oxidation, thus having useful protective qualities, as well as offering an uninteresting flavour profile, which manifests itself in a bouquet that has been variously described as like gunflint or struck match.

So, where do we go from here? If you like the richer, rounder, softer style of Chardonnay à la bourguignonne, then look for sunshine vintages such as 2019, appellations such as Meursault (even if sommeliers can no longer promise butter and hazelnuts), Pouilly-Fuissé (especially from the commune of Fuissé), Bâtard-Montrachet (if you are wealthy enough), Chassagne-Montrachet Premier Cru from the Morgeot area, or maybe Beaune Clos des Mouches. Then look for producers that prefer not to pick too early.

If, however, you eschew the riper approach, then Chablis, St-Aubin, St-Romain, Pernand-Vergelesses and Montagny might be happier hunting grounds – and look out for the more chiselled approach of those who aim to pick a little earlier. If we were to allow ourselves to creep outside the Chardonnay box, there is another classic Burgundian grape that is rather enjoying the sunshine years. Aligoté is no longer thin and tart but ripening happily at around 12.5% abv. It may well be that this grape will soon be allowed, in small proportions, in the white wine appellations of Burgundy as both a seasoning and a balance to Chardonnay.

Let us finish, though, with the image of some seasoned Burgundian vineyard workers, elbows on the table, sleeves rolled up, sitting in a cafe during a break in the day’s work, digging bulbous noses into a glass of well-made Bourgogne blanc. ‘*Ah, ben oui, ça chardonne...*’ There’s nothing to touch it when our Burgundian vigneron call it right. ○

**White Burgundies of the late 1970s  
were succulent wines  
of a pale golden hue,  
though often with  
a streak of green**

Historically, premium Irish whiskey has been rare. Yet today, there is an increasing demand for high-end, well-aged – and extravagantly priced – bottlings. Joel Harrison looks at how the Emerald Isle turned the corner to yield one of the most sought-after spirits around

# The rise and rise of Irish whiskey

Workers at the Jameson distillery in Dublin gearing up for the Irish whiskey boom of the late 1800s

In 1871, the Distillers Company Ltd put out a fundraising pitch for a potential new distillery in Dublin. ‘The demand for Dublin whiskey is estimated to be more than fivefold that of Scotch at present,’ it said, in a bid to entice investors. While there may have been a touch of hyperbole around the claim, the Distillers Company would – eventually – prove a good investment; in 1986 it was bought by Guinness, a business that is today the global drinks giant (and owner of Johnnie Walker, among countless other brands) Diageo.

Not even the Distillers Company would claim that it was ‘Dublin whiskey’ that drove such growth, however – and it would take even longer for the spirit that was booming as a good-time drink in the mid-19th century to mature into today’s posh pour. The journey to that point has been something of a rollercoaster ride...

In the early 1800s, whisky-making developed from a farmhouse endeavour into a fully fledged business. But whereas Scotland built itself a network of small, often rural distilleries (by the end of the 19th century, it boasted more than 130), Ireland focused on a handful of very large, urban producers with enormous production capacity. In the mid-1800s, the ‘big four’ Dublin distilleries of William Jameson’s Marrowbone Lane operation (later the Dublin Distillers Co), John Jameson & Son’s Bow Street Distillery (home to the Jameson brand), George Roe & Co, and John Power & Son ruled the roost. Along with a handful of smaller Irish distilleries, their output at the time was highly regarded and accounted for one gallon in every seven made across Great Britain and Ireland.

But cold economic winds were to blow through the world of distilling in the first part of the 20th century, the result of huge oversupply, the Great Depression, World War I, and the onset of Prohibition in North America. The downturn led to the closure of 40 Scottish distilleries – and Irish whiskey was not immune either. Along with the same bleak economic headwinds, Ireland also had to contend with the 1916 Easter Rising and civil war, all of which had a major impact on the island’s whiskey production.

By 1960, Ireland had lost 26 of the 30 distilleries that were previously operational, leaving, once again, just four across the Emerald Isle. This time, they were more evenly split across the country: Bushmills in County Antrim, Northern Ireland; Jameson and Powers in Dublin; and Cork Distilleries Company in the south. The latter three merged in 1966 to form Irish Distillers, consolidating production at a new distillery in Midleton, County Cork and leaving Dublin dry in terms of whiskey-making.

Unlike Scotch or Cognac, whiskey from Ireland had never been able to assert a premium presence within the drinks world, helped and hindered in equal measure by an Irish diaspora with a reputation for ‘the craic’ and the decidedly blue-collared thread woven into the tapestry of American society, the drink’s main export market. It wasn’t until the end of the 20th century that demand started to build towards the relative powerhouse that it has become today – and that Dublin Distillers had envisaged in its pitch 150 years previously.

By then, Ireland as a country was growing in stature. The euro would be introduced in 2002, the Celtic Tiger was in full roar, and the Emerald Isle was shining bright. Whiskey became an ambassador for Irish luxury around the world, with the pot-still style in particular establishing itself as a cultural emblem.

Devised as an innovative way to circumnavigate a historic 1785 tax levied by the British Crown on malted barley destined for Irish whiskey production, the pot-still style of whiskey employs a mix of both malted and unmalted barley. The leading practitioner was Jameson, a brand that found favour as a smooth, easy-drinking whiskey. Unlike blended Scotch, which combines single malts encompassing a range of flavours, including smoky characteristics, Jameson was a blend that drew on the unique flavour of Irish pot-still whiskey and grain whiskey.

Pot still is also the flagship style produced today at the Midleton distillery. Bushmills, by contrast, located on the northern coast near the Giant’s Causeway, has consistently maintained the use of only malted barley, producing a single-malt style of whiskey. What Bushmills and Midleton have in common, however, is that both have always employed triple distillation for their spirit, adding an extra stage in the production over the mostly double-distilled Scottish single malts. And it is the smoothness gained from triple distillation for which Irish whiskey is best known, with the mixture of malted



Clockwise from above: Teeling made its name bottling whiskey from smaller distilleries before branching out into distilling; Powers, Midleton and Jameson can all trace their history back to the early days.

Opposite: Bushmills stands apart not only for being based in Northern Ireland but for favouring single malt over pot-still whiskey



JOHN ALLEN / IRISH DISTILLERS FERNOD RICARD



THOMAS SKOVSENDE

## Whiskey has become an ambassador for Irish luxury around the world, with the pot-still style assuming the status of a cultural emblem

and unmalted barley in pot still adding layers of creamy texture and a delicate finesse, driving its popularity with consumers.

As Jameson established itself as the market leader, its success created a demand for this more premium style. Since the start of this century, pot-still whiskey brands such as Redbreast have gained a reverential following among whiskey enthusiasts, despite – or perhaps because of – their relative scarcity. Green Spot, an equally elusive pot-still whiskey, became much acclaimed by drinkers, if rarely seen; Midleton Very Rare (see p.102), another blend that draws heavily on the pot-still style, appeared as an annual high-quality limited-edition release, though often at a price that proved prohibitive to many.

Aside from a few smaller Irish whiskey brands using spirit made at Bushmills or Midleton, and the own-label Bushmills whiskeys themselves, the majority of classic brands – including Redbreast, Green Spot, Midleton and Jameson – are owned by one single company: Irish Distillers. Seeing an opportunity to focus on its single-pot-still whiskeys, in 2011 Irish Distillers launched its Single Pot Still Whiskeys of Midleton range, a collection of four versions of popular brands from its portfolio. Thrown into the spotlight were Green Spot, Midleton's Barry Crockett Legacy, Powers' John's Lane and a new version of the much-loved Redbreast 12-year-old.

The past decade has seen this range grow, with a particular focus on Redbreast and the Spot range. Redbreast has a flock that includes not just the 12-year-old but a cask-strength version, too; a 15-year-old; a bottling that draws on whiskey matured in Sherry casks from the famed Lustau bodega; and 21- and 27-year-old expressions. There have even been Dream Cask releases of single casks over the past few years, reaching prices that some of the auction-grade single-malt Scotch houses would be proud of.

More exotic in personality still is the Spot range. Historically, it wasn't just distillers such as John Jameson that put their name to bottles of whiskey. Wine merchants would often purchase whiskey spirit to mature in their own former wine casks, and one such business was Dublin-based family firm Mitchell & Son. The Spot range takes its name from the system used by the Mitchell family, which marked the different ages of maturing whiskey on their cask ends with a dab of coloured paint.

Today, the Spot range is made up of a seven-year-old Blue Spot (matured in ex-bourbon, Sherry and Madeira barrels), a 12-year-old Yellow Spot (matured in wine casks from Málaga), and a 15-year-old Red Spot (drawn from ex-bourbon, Sherry and Sicilian Marsala wine casks). The classic Green Spot, meanwhile, which is usually matured in both ex-bourbon barrels and Sherry butts, has seen limited-edition releases made in partnership with



Boosted by the likes of Midleton (left and below left) and Teeling (below), sales of Irish whiskey have risen from five million cases a year in 2010 to 14 million in 2021

JOHN SHEEHAN



famed Bordeaux winery Château Léoville Barton, as well as one matured for 12 months in casks that previously held the bold red wine of Napa Valley's equally renowned Chateau Montelena.

With Jameson's launch of a limited-edition single-pot-still, the journey has now come full circle. The small-run, 15-year-old release is the first Jameson-branded single-pot-still whiskey to be released since the turn of the century, with the 50cl bottle priced at €300 a go. Just 2,220 bottles have been made available, solely through an online ballot.

Just as a rising tide floats all boats, so other producers have benefited from this premiumisation. Teeling has built a fine reputation on bottling whiskey produced at the small number of Irish distilleries that were operational during the latter half of the 20th century. The family from which the company takes its name opened its own distillery in 2015, becoming the first whiskey-distilling operation to open in the city for 40 years. Its collection includes a 37-year-old single malt that will set you back a cool £7,500.

Not to be outdone, Bushmills – a stalwart of the Irish whiskey scene – has now joined the premium scene. Although granted a licence to distil in 1608, Bushmills' current whiskey-making facility dates back to 1885, after the previous distillery was

destroyed in a fire. For decades, the brand focused on its core bottlings of Black Bush, a blended whiskey, and the range of single malts aged for 10, 16 and 21 years. Recently, however, after years of diffidence, the distillery decided to delve into its warehouses and release a series of luxury bottlings under the Causeway Collection banner. Offerings so far include the 27-year-old ex-bourbon single-cask release (€650 a bottle), a 1995 vintage ex-Marsala cask releases (€410), a 1995-vintage ex-Málaga wine cask (€475) and a 30-year-old that originally hit the shelves at €700 a bottle but is now changing hands for twice that. The latest release in the collection is a 1991 vintage matured in former Madeira casks; it is sold exclusively through The Whisky Shop in the UK at £695 a pop.

It is hard to believe that, only a decade ago, Ireland boasted just three distilleries. Now there are in excess of 30 in operation, with more to come. The trailblazing releases from Irish Distillers' single-pot-still range, the well-aged whiskeys from Teeling and the stellar examples of single malt in Bushmills' new Causeway Collection have all set the scene for a new golden age in Irish whiskey. ○

*For the best Irish whiskeys from this year's IWSC, see p.106*

# Australian Chardonnay

**It started with the 'liberation' of some vines from a Penfolds vineyard. Five decades on, Huon Hooke glories in just how far the variety has come down under, with a look at the top current examples**

Chardonnay's evolution in Australia has followed a classic learning curve. The great white grape of Burgundy and Champagne was virtually unknown here until the 1970s. Now it is the nation's most-planted white variety, accounting for half of all white wine produced.

Depending on who you believe, its story dates back to 1970, when a visiting French ampelographer identified Chardonnay in a Mudgee vineyard, where it had been growing since the 1930s. In more celebrated fashion, Murray Tyrrell had also discovered it growing in a Penfolds vineyard in Hunter Valley named HVD and apparently helped himself to some cuttings in the dead of night before planting them out at Tyrrell's in 1968. His first vintage of what he named 'Pinot Chardonnay' was the 1971 and in time, this became Tyrrell's Vat 47 Chardonnay, the oldest continuing line of the variety produced in Australia.

Initially, Australian winemakers fermented the clarified juice in steel tanks and bottled it unoaked; then they started maturing the steel-fermented wine in barrels, before finally cottoning on to the Burgundian practice of fermenting in barrels. Sometimes

the wines underwent spontaneous malolactic fermentation, with the result that the acidity was low and needed correcting. Some opted to block the malo, as many still do.

Today, earlier harvesting is widely practised, with a trio of desirable outcomes: final alcohols are lower, the wines age better, and there is less need for acidification. Cooler-climate winemakers often still use whole or partial malo, since this is seen to be part of the character of classic Chardonnay wines.

The first Aussie Chardonnays were mostly from warmer climates less suited to the grape: Hunter Valley, Mudgee, Riverland, Riverina. These were often full-bodied, sometimes unsubtle, occasionally clumsy wines – and oft overoaked as winemakers learned how to use barrels with white wine, a novel idea to Australians back then. At the same time, far-sighted winemakers such as John Middleton at Mount Mary and Bailey Carrodus at Yarra Yering, both in the Yarra Valley, were early planters of cool-climate Chardonnay.

Today, most of Australia's leading examples are being grown in what could be termed cool climates, which is a loose and relative term. They're cool by Australian standards. My list of

25 top examples overleaf includes mostly southern regions: Tasmania; southern and high-altitude Victoria; alpine New South Wales; high-altitude Adelaide Hills; and Margaret River. On paper, Margaret River is the warmest, at the warmer extreme of Winkler Region III. That's cooler than St Helena or Avignon, but warmer than Healdsburg or Logroño. But while Margaret River may seem like a warm region, there are many cool sites in warm regions, and Margaret River is the source of 11 of the 25 wines here.

Why is Margaret River so successful with Chardonnay? It seems to break the rules: it's maritime (Burgundy is continental), low altitude, and quite northerly in latitude – on a par with Sydney. The secret is its westerly (oceanic) weather and cooling ocean currents. The present Australian trend is towards refined, restrained, pared-back styles; Margaret River excels because it naturally combines refinement of structure with Chardonnay's innate generosity of flavour.

Australian winemakers now have several decades of experience with Chardonnay, and the payoff comes in the form of a multitude of delicious, flavoursome yet refined wines from many regions.

98

**Bass Phillip, Premium, Gippsland, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–32*

Bass Phillip, established by the now-retired Phillip Jones in 1979, is mainly noted for Pinot Noir. It was recently purchased by Jean-Marie Fourrier of Burgundy, so its future seems assured. The bouquet here incorporates creamy lees, cashew nut, nougat and peanut brittle, mealy and savoury. It's a stunning wine of density and gravitas – about complexity as opposed to simple fruit, perhaps nodding more towards France than Australia. 13.4%

N/A UK

98

**Leeuwin Estate, Art Series, Margaret River, Australia 2018**

*Drink 2022–36*

This is the wine that put Margaret River Chardonnay on the map. Leeuwin has gradually trimmed back the oak and refined the style without losing any of its greatness. The colour is remarkably light for its years, while the bouquet is complex, yet fresh and restrained, showing captivating nougat aromas that lead into a concentrated, powerful but elegant palate of tremendous persistence. The delicious array of flavours encompasses lemon drops, honey and myriad other nuances. 13.5%

From £75 Four Walls Wine Company, Stannary Wine, Uncorked

98

**Vasse Felix, Heytesbury, Margaret River, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–35*

Heytesbury is the name of owner Paul Holmes à Court's family cattle property. It's also the name of Vasse Felix's top Chardonnay. The grapefruit flavours are a signature of the Gingen clone favoured for Margaret River Chardonnay. There are grilled nut and smoky nuances too, the palate intense and refined, with great line and length. A stunning wine that sings with great purity. 13.5%

£64.10 Fine+Rare, Hedonism Wines, Laithwaites

97

**Cullen, Kevin John, Margaret River, Australia 2021**

*Drink 2022–36*

Cullen is a model for sustainability, fully biodynamic and carbon-positive. It's one of the original Margaret River wineries and is run by Vanya Cullen, a daughter of the founders. The complex bouquet evokes creamy lees-derived and dried-fruit aromas with biscuity oak and a little toastiness. It's bright and intense in the mouth, with delicate and piercing lemon and grapefruit flavours. Intensity plus refinement. A precision Chardonnay of superior tension and finesse and a long, long carry. 13%

£110 (2020) Hedonism Wines

97

**Flametree, SRS, Wallcliffe, Margaret River, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–35*

Wallcliffe is one of several unofficial subregions of Margaret River, set in the southern half of the region. Winemaker Cliff Royle is a Chardonnay specialist. There's a nutty, toasty, nougat, oak-tinged bouquet leading into a palate that's more restrained than anticipated. It's taut and refined, tense and long, with subtle citrus/grapefruit touches, building great intensity as it flows through the mouth. Vibrant acidity helps drive a lingering finish. 13%

£30 WoodWinters

97

**Howard Park, Allingham, Margaret River, Australia 2018**

*Drink 2022–30*

Allingham is a family name of the Burch family, the owners of Howard Park. This wine was made by long-serving, award-winning Janice McDonald, who recently moved on to pastures new. At four years, this is building great richness and a bouquet that evokes roasted hazelnut and buttery toast, while the palate is soft and rounded, rich and yet retaining its refined, understated style. It has that winning combination of generosity and finesse that the region does so well. 13%

£45 (2019) Harvey Nichols

97

**Petaluma, Tiers Vineyard, Adelaide Hills, Australia 2019**

*Drink 2022–34*

This is made with grapes from the Croser family's Tiers vineyard in the Piccadilly Valley, the oldest vineyard in the Adelaide Hills. There are quartz-like mineral and struck-flint aromas over chalky touches, with liberal nutty oak on the mid-palate, almond and malt traces chiming in. The fruit is powerful and balanced, the mid-palate intensity very impressive, acidity helping drive it, and the finish harmonious and satisfying. A smashing Chardonnay, with great length and a wonderful aftertaste. 14%

£62 (2015) Harrods

97

**Pierro, Margaret River, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–34*

Winemaker-proprietor Mike Peterkin was one of the first in Australia to make Chardonnay using the full Burgundy paintbox, including barrel fermentation and malolactic. The colour here is medium-full yellow, and there's a tremendously complex, expressive bouquet of buttered toast, smoky oak and cedar, superimposed on complex fruit in the range of nectarine to grapefruit. It's wonderfully deep in the mid-palate – concentrated and persistent, with a profound and detailed array of flavours. 13.5%

£42.95 Winoship Portfolio Wines

97

**Tolpuddle Vineyard, Tasmania, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–35*

This established vineyard in southern Tasmania's Coal River Valley was acquired in 2011 by Shaw + Smith, which immediately began producing stellar Chardonnays and Pinots. This is in a youthful, slow-ageing style; it has a light yellow hue and a powerful, smoky, toasty bouquet, with struck-flint characters. The wine is tightly focused and lively on the tongue, with bright acidity and penetrating length. A superb, piercing, high-tension Chardonnay, with cool-climate precision, finesse and length. 13%

£64 Vin Cognito

# 96

**Cherubino, Margaret River, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–31*

Larry Cherubino has sourced grapes from the north and south of Margaret River: Wilyabrup and Karridale. The bouquet here recalls almond meal, pencil wood, cashew nut and cream cheese, grapefruit chiming in later. It is delicate, refined and subtle in the mouth, but also intense and penetrating, with mouthwatering acidity and a refreshing aftertaste that begs for another sip. Delicious and complete. 13.5%

£30.05 Strictly Wine

# 96

**Giaconda, Nantua Les Deux, Beechworth, Australia 2021**

*Drink 2022–33*

For many, Giaconda is the source of the greatest Australian Chardonnay, and they will brook no argument. The producer single-handedly put Beechworth on the vinous map, and while this is the second-string Giaconda Chardonnay, seldom is a second wine so outstanding. It has much of the distinctive smoky charcuterie, chicken-stock reductive overtones of the grand vin, as well as its fleshy richness, amplitude and supple texture. A smashing young Chardonnay. 13.5%

N/A UK



# 96

**Deep Woods Estate, Reserve, Margaret River, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–32*

Deep Woods Estate is part of the growing Fogarty Wine Group, which is big in Margaret River and has recently expanded into Tasmania and Victoria's Pyrenees region. Spicy oak and smoky struck-flint characters intertwine with grapefruit in a tense, taut, nervy Chardonnay that has great energy and persistence. It's great to drink now and has a bright future ahead of it. 13%

£23.33 (2019) Cru World Wine

# 96

**Domaine Naturaliste, Artus, Margaret River, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–30*

Bruce Dukes is a sought-after contract winemaker in the Margaret River region, producing his own range of wines under the Domaine Naturaliste label. The name is that of an early French explorer's ship. Artus is Dukes's wilder interpretation of Chardonnay, with a super-funky bouquet that includes smoky sulphides, citrus fruits and Parmesan cheese, while the palate is intense and powerful, the fruit concentrated, very persistent and balanced by vibrant acidity. An impressive wine of character and drive. 13.5%

£31.50 (2019) Vinorium

# 96

**Giant Steps, Wombat Creek Vineyard, Yarra Valley, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–30*

Giant Steps founder Phil Sexton has done more than most mortals manage in a lifetime, establishing two wineries and a brewery. (He recently sold Giant Steps to America's Jackson Family Wines.) From the highest and coolest Giant Steps vineyard, this super-fine Chardonnay has aromas of almond, malt, smoky sulphides and cracked wheat. It's a delicate yet intense wine, with lovely flow across the palate, the aftertaste showing a distinctive malt-biscuit note and mouthwatering citrusy acidity that is beautifully integrated into a seamless whole. 13%

£37.60 (2019) Hedonism Wines

# 96

**Hardy's, Eileen Hardy, Yarra Valley/Margaret River, Australia 2019**

*Drink 2022–29*

Hardy's – like Penfolds – is a great blender, and this wine goes against the usual Australian trend by blending fruit from various regions. The colour is a luminous full yellow, and the bouquet dances with nutty, toasty, beeswax and buttery aromas that reflect generous but not excessive use of oak. It's full-bodied and generous, a traditional style with the entire suite of Chardonnay complexities. 14%

£49 Harvey Nichols



# 96

**Penfolds, Yattarna, Tasmania/Tumbarumba/Adelaide Hills, Australia 2019**

*Drink 2022–38*

Fruit from Tasmania, Tumbarumba and Adelaide Hills was blended and spent eight months in French oak, 55% of it new. The bouquet is initially strong on smoky-reductive matchstick notes, and the toasty oak is quite apparent but not overdone. The wine is focused, taut, intense and discreetly rich across the tongue, the aftertaste very long and emphatic, the savoury dryness carrying long and leaving an appetising, enduring finish. High potential for cellaring. 12.5%

£150 Harrods

# 96

**Robert Oatley, The Pennant, Margaret River, Australia 2019**

*Drink 2022–31*

Oatley's top white wines are increasingly sourced in Western Australia, where chief winemaker Larry Cherubino is based. There are quite complex dusty, gently toasty, spicy and faintly smoky aromas here. The wine is very intense and penetrating on the palate, with refinement, line and length, the aftertaste echoing long and brightly with hi-fi grapefruit flavours. The oak has been superbly managed. An impressive wine with a future. 12.5%

£29.55 Vinvm

# 96

**Shaw + Smith, Lenswood Vineyard, Adelaide Hills, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–35*

Shaw + Smith bought an established Lenswood property, refocusing a sparkling wine vineyard towards table wines, with spectacular results. The refined bouquet presents straw, toast, Weet-Bix/Weetabix and smoked charcuterie on a subtle lemony background. The wine has exceptional refinement, as well as intensity, and there's a subtle backing of tannin that adds structure, while the overall impression is mouthwatering and delicate, lemon/citrusy and long. Oak is nigh on invisible. 13.5%

£45 (in bond) Lay & Wheeler

# 96

**Soumah, Equilibrio, Yarra Valley, Australia 2019**

*Drink 2022–31*

Equilibrio is Soumah's top label, the grapes sourced from the company's own Hexham vineyard in the Warramate foothills. The super-complex bouquet showcases stylish oak, smoky small-goods aromas and a hint of nougat, while the palate is very intense and tightly composed, with elegance and persistence. Subtle yet powerful. There's a core of ripe-fruit sweetness, countered by acidity and tannins that cleanse and extend the finish. This is an explosive and multilayered Chardonnay. 13%

£28.18 (in bond) The Vinorium

# 96

**Xanadu, Reserve, Margaret River, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–34*

Xanadu is one of the early established wineries of the region, now part of the Rathbone Wine Group, which also owns Mount Langi Ghiran Vineyard and Yering Station. The wine opens with a youthfully light, bright colour and a reserved bouquet that signals slow development and age-worthiness. Grapefruit is laced with nutty nuances. The palate has excellent intensity plus concentration delivered with understatement, the reserve boding well for its future, although it delivers beautifully now. 13%

£53 North & South Wines

# 96

**By Farr, GC Côte Vineyard, Geelong, Australia 2020**

*Drink 2022–32*

The Farr family, today headed by winemaker Nick Farr, uses only grapes from its own vineyards in the Moorabool Valley. This is a tremendously intense and focused wine, with aromas of lemon balm, creamy lees and pencil wood, grapefruit chiming in on the palate. It's still building complexity and has a winning combination of power and subtlety. A smashing Chardonnay. 13.5%

£60 (in bond) Renaissance Vintners



# 95

**Bannockburn Vineyards, SRH, Geelong, Australia 2018**

*Drink 2022–30*

Bannockburn Vineyards is the senior winery in the Geelong region's Moorabool Valley, the driest, lowest-yielding Geelong subregion. The colour is light and bright for its age; and the bouquet is likewise fresh and young, carrying some vanilla and dairy aromas, with lightly toasted almond touches. The palate is delicate, restrained, refined and subtle, but it also has power and length. This is a wine of real style and ageing potential. 13%

From £69.90 (2014) Hedonism Wines, Theatre of Wine

# 95

**Dalrymple, Cave Block, Tasmania, Australia 2018**

*Drink 2022–28*

Dalrymple is part of the Hill-Smith/Yalumba group, a sister to sparkling winery Jansz; both are in Tasmania's Pipers River region. This wine has a light, bright lemon colour, and there's a restrained aroma that suggests lightly toasted cashew nut and almond. The palate is intense and concentrated, with length and penetration, lovely purity of fruit, and clarity of lemon and grapefruit flavour. This lingers long. Seriously good wine and great value. 13%

£21.33 (in bond) Cru



# 95

**Mount Mary Vineyard, Yarra Valley, Australia 2019**

*Drink 2022–31*

Thanks to a variety of sites and aspects, Mount Mary manages to produce outstanding wines from both Burgundy and Bordeaux varieties off just one vineyard. A restrained but complex bouquet reveals mealy, nutty and smoky roast-hazelnut nuances, the taste rich and ample with length and harmony, as well as refinement. There are smoky-reductive notes, buttery croissant and roasted-nut touches. The full Chardonnay orchestra is playing here. 13%

N/A UK

# 95

**Oakridge, 864, Funder & Diamond Vineyard, Drive Block, Yarra Valley, Australia 2019**

*Drink 2022–31*

864 is Oakridge's top label, and this vineyard is on a close-planted, north-facing site 240m high on red volcanic soil at Wandin East. Smoky and toasty aromas are much in evidence, with generous spicy oak and reductive touches. A powerful palate of density, concentration and length follows. This is a full-bodied, very savoury style that is built to age and would reward a little extra cellaring. 14%

£32.92 (2016, in bond) Farr Vintners



**As more and more of us cut back on meat, restaurants have risen to the challenge. But when it comes to the very top end, asks George Reynolds, are veganism and haute cuisine compatible?**

# Can fine dining go vegan?



Eleven Madison Park's vegan take on steak – via aubergine

EVAN SUNG

**B**ack in 2009, Daniel Patterson, the chef and owner of the since shuttered two-Michelin-starred Coi in San Francisco, made a striking proclamation. Writing in the *Financial Times*, he profiled a number of chefs who were rejecting the imported luxe ingredients previously ubiquitous in fine dining kitchens – fillet steak, foie gras, lobster – in favour of fruit, grains and vegetables. The latter could be grown with love and care closer to home, he explained, and the piece's headline captured this sea change in culinary thinking with striking economy: 'Carrots are the new caviar.'

Thirteen years is a long time in fine dining, and the wheels of fashion and taste have revolved several times since Patterson put pen to paper. But what sounded back then like a rallying cry in favour of seasonal, produce-led cooking now has a slightly different resonance. In the face of the climate crisis, chefs in restaurants across the world are beginning to re-evaluate the amount of environmentally damaging fish and animal products on their menus. As more and more consumers flirt with or switch fully to a vegan diet, fine dining is beginning to consider whether it, too, should move with the times. Patterson's article was about encouraging 'a willingness to reconsider what's worth eating'. But it envisaged a world where both animal protein and vegetables could live together on the plate as equals. More than a decade on, people are beginning to ask whether meat, fish, dairy and cheese have any place on a menu at all. This time, we mean it literally: *can* carrots become the new caviar?

Combating the climate crisis takes many forms, even if fine dining might seem a funny place to start. By virtue of the eye-watering sticker price of dinner in a high-end restaurant, these are not the type of places most people visit with any frequency. Furthermore, the sort of meat and fish served in Michelin-starred restaurants is not exactly what we mean when we say fishing and farming is destroying the planet: can we not leave chefs and their free-range, heritage-breed livestock out of the conversation?

Unfortunately, the answer is no, not really. It's a line of argument that overlooks the outsized impact fine dining has on the rest of the food world – and the influence wielded by the biggest beasts at the top of the culinary chain. From Gordon Ramsay to René Redzepi, celebrity chefs are commanding figures, with sizeable social media followings; they have an undeniable impact and can therefore lead from the front.

The most notable case of someone doing so is Daniel Humm, who announced (tellingly, via Instagram) in May 2021 that when it reopened after a 15-month Covid-enforced hiatus, Eleven Madison Park – his Manhattan-based, three-Michelin-starred temple to gastronomy, which as recently as 2017 had been crowned the best restaurant in the world – would go entirely plant-based.

This was not exactly the first time a story like this had broken: Alain Passard scandalised half of Paris when he removed meat



from the menu at L'Arpège as far back as 2001; when Thomas Keller opened Per Se in New York in 2004, sceptics rolled their eyes at the idea of a vegetarian tasting menu on offer for the best part of \$300; in London, Gauthier Soho, which had offered a pioneering vegan alternative to its tasting menu long before such things were fashionable, quietly also went 100% plant-based last year. But this was the first time a chef with Humm's global profile, in a restaurant of Eleven Madison Park's cachet, had done something on this scale.

To say the news caused a sensation would be an understatement. Humm later announced that the waiting list had topped out at more than 50,000 people, and over the coming months, food-dork social media would be driven into a frenzy by images and descriptions of the ingenious lengths to which Humm and his team had gone to replicate the look and feel of being in a fine dining restaurant without any of the ingredients that usually act as helpful context clues. Teensy tonburi seeds, imported from Japan, took the place of sturgeon roe in Eleven Madison Park's riff on a caviar service; a gorgeous, mimetic disk of sunflower butter topped with miso accompanied bread rolls; beetroots and aubergines were marinated, roasted, charred and sauced to attempt to echo the nuanced, umami-heavy flavours of prime cuts of meat. On Instagram, at least, it looked like the future could actually have arrived.

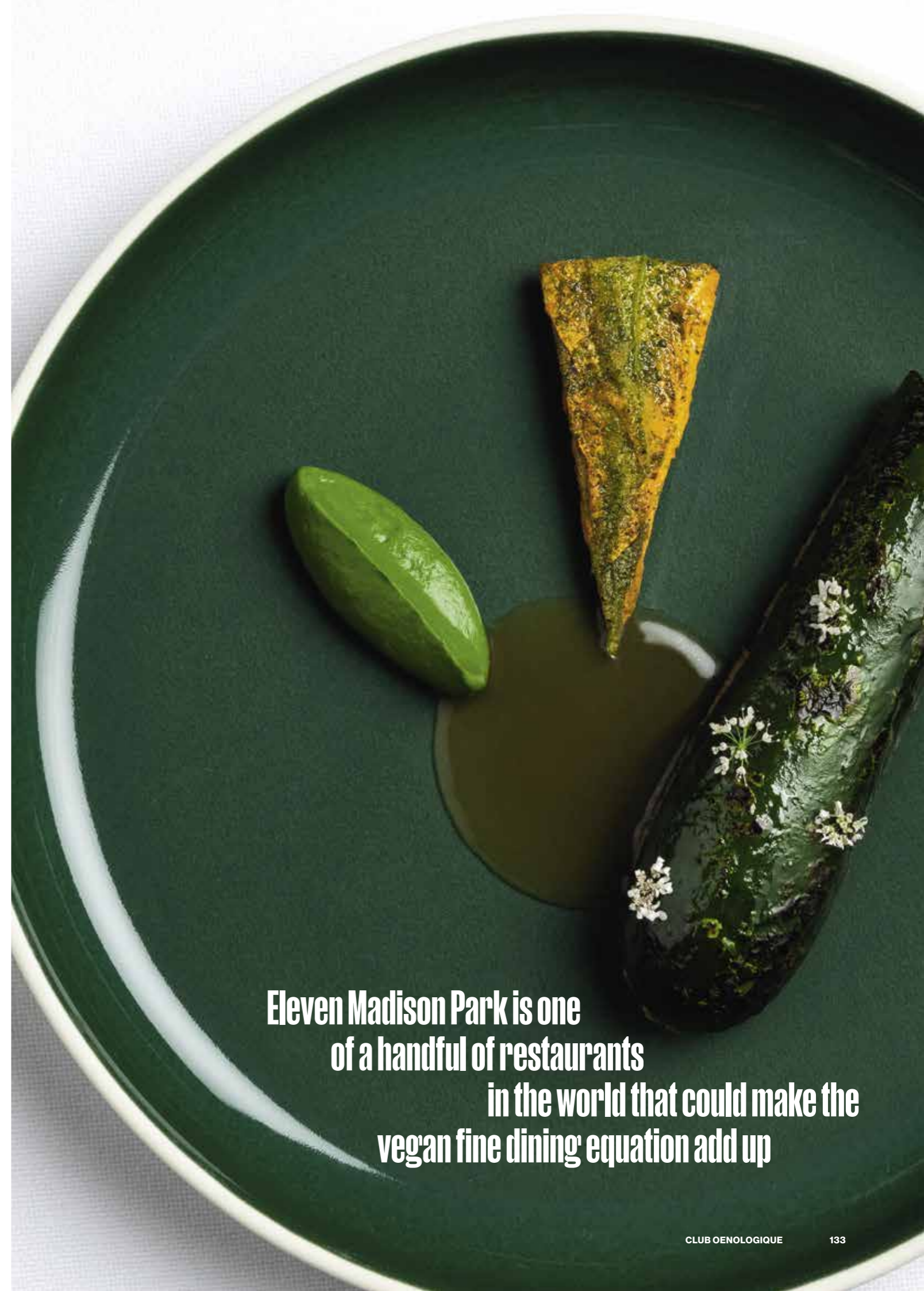
Then the reviews began to come in. The *New York Times*'s Pete Wells likened eating there to exploring 'the plant kingdom's uncanny valley', declaring that 'almost none of the main ingredients taste quite like themselves' in the course of a 10-course, \$335-a-head tasting menu; *Eater*'s Ryan Sutton minced even fewer words, stating flatly that 'Eleven Madison Park Isn't Ready to Be a World-Class Vegan Restaurant' and noting several courses are still clearly 'works in progress'.

The dissatisfaction that Sutton and Wells felt with some of the dishes they'd eaten gets to one of the core issues with vegan fine dining as a concept. Meat, fish and dairy have risen to prominence in our culture for a host of complex historical reasons. They were originally harder to attain than plant matter (wild animals being more dangerous than barely animate plants and trees), and as our dietary fixation on protein ballooned following World War II, they have only gained in perceived value.

From top: more vegan creations from Eleven Madison Park, featuring oyster mushrooms, golden beets and blueberry.

Opposite: a dish from its summer 2022 menu

EVAN SUNG



**Eleven Madison Park is one  
of a handful of restaurants  
in the world that could make the  
vegan fine dining equation add up**

One simple additional explanation for their durability is that they're also delicious. Pigs, cows and chickens are repositories of flavour-enhancing fat; animal proteins caramelise when they come into contact with heat, producing a whole host of additional tastes and aromas; cheeses hum with the lactic tang of microbial activity. This is not to say it is impossible for vegan food to taste as nice or as satisfying as non-vegan food – anyone who has enjoyed a wrap stuffed with crispy falafel and creamy tahini can testify otherwise – but delivering deliciousness without recourse to animal products is that much harder. Add salt to a steak and put it on a barbecue, and you get one of life's great dining experiences. Add salt to an aubergine and put it on a barbecue, and you get a burnt aubergine. Making an all-vegan menu taste good enough to merit a \$335 price tag takes *work*. And if the result of all that manipulation is still not as delicious as the dish it purports to replace – in the sort of restaurant where deliciousness is the whole point – the exercise does begin to feel somewhat futile.

It is for this reason that it hard to imagine everyone in fine dining following Humm's lead. Eleven Madison Park is one of a handful of restaurants in the world that could make the vegan fine dining equation add up. Even in a period of unprecedented labour shortages, it can take its pick from the young chefs lining up to work in its kitchen, elevating aubergines into art; even in a world where people are sceptical enough about vegan fine dining, it is famous enough to have punters queuing out the door for the opportunity to spend a non-refundable \$335 on a

booking months down the line. Humm was praised by many for the risk he took in going vegan, but he is hardly the same as a chef-proprietor trying to keep the lights on at the lone high-end restaurant in a small town. Going 100% plant-based in that context might offer a little more jeopardy.

Certainly, this is what Claridge's felt when, in one of the biggest restaurant news stories last year, Humm parted ways with the London hotel after just two years at the helm of his restaurant there, Davies and Brook. Humm had wanted to follow the lead of Eleven Madison Park by taking the menu entirely plant-based; the hotel's official statement politely noted, 'This is not the path we wish to follow here at Claridge's at the moment, and therefore, regretfully, we have mutually agreed to go our separate ways.' Ouch.

Yet even stating that vegan fine dining is unlikely to catch on presupposes some fairly fundamental things about the very idea of fine dining, and what a vegan version of it should look like. In Eleven Madison Park's fake caviar service or Gauthier Soho's celebrated 'faux gras' (a concoction of mushrooms, lentils, walnuts and Cognac), there is a clear attempt at one-for-one substitution: take the old classics of fine dining, only somehow veganise them. But if you trace fine dining back along its history, one thing it has never been is plant-based: historically, anyway, it has been horrendously Eurocentric, happy to borrow (especially from the traditions of Japan) when it suited its purpose, but hidebound in its preference for certain techniques, ingredients and methods of presentation. How can anyone ever create an

equally satisfying version of that experience while denying themselves so many of its fundamental building blocks?

True vegan fine dining would necessarily look significantly different from fine dining as it has existed up to this point. Eleven Madison Park, with its dosas and its tonburi, at times tacitly (and to be fair, at times explicitly) acknowledges that there are other parts of the world where rich and robust plant-based traditions have developed over time. Humm is vocal in his admiration for Japanese shojin cuisine (an entirely vegan culinary repertoire with Buddhist roots); Sichuan, Ital and certain regional Indian cuisines are the product of centuries' worth of culinary experimentation within the plant kingdom.

And so perhaps the most intriguing thing about the question of vegan fine dining is that it could open up a whole new conversation around who gets to cook high-end food and what that food looks like. In this analysis, a 2017 episode of the Netflix documentary series *Chef's Table* is especially prescient. In previous seasons, the show had profiled the big beasts of Western fine dining, such as Massimo Bottura, Grant Achatz and – in its French incarnation – Alain Passard. But this time around, it told the story of Jeong Kwan, a Zen Buddhist nun who cooked for the worshippers at Baekyangsa Temple in South Korea – and did so via an entirely vegan repertoire of dishes. As the familiar music began to swell and the usual shots of prime proteins were replaced with loving still lifes of pickled lotus roots, tofu dumplings and vibrant kimchi, one thing became clear: carrots are *not* the new caviar – and that's exactly where things get exciting. ○

EVAN SUNG; HANNAH WARREN; CRAIG MCDEAN



From top: Daniel Humm parted ways with Claridge's when it rejected his all-vegan approach; Alexis Gauthier has been more successful with dishes at his meat-free Gauthier Soho (below)



Tonburi seeds, imported from Japan, took the place of sturgeon roe in Eleven Madison Park's riff on a caviar service

